
Introduction

'It's prefigurative, so to speak'

Tahrir Square lies in the heart of London's financial district. Or, at least, this is what a faux street sign, attached to one of the office buildings next to the imposing St Paul's Cathedral, seemed to suggest. It was October 2011, nine months after the people of Egypt had ended Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year dictatorship, and Occupy London Stock Exchange (Occupy LSX) had set up camp on the steps of St Paul's. For more than four months the occupiers defied the winter cold, only to be evicted by the end of February. In the meantime, their movement would give rise to a lively public debate on austerity politics, democracy, the accessibility of higher education and the private ownership of public space. The London occupiers obviously did not seek to topple a military dictatorship, and no one died defending the encampment. But they nevertheless felt that they had something essential in common with the Egyptian revolutionaries. Arguably, they shared a rudimentary understanding of what it means to seek change and to act democratically.

These London protesters surely were not the only ones who gave expression to this sense of commonality. As a matter of fact, in 2011 and the ensuing years the world witnessed a wave of similar 'occupy movements'.¹ It is impossible to pinpoint how, where and when exactly this global wave of protest movements has commenced, but clearly the occupied Tahrir Square and the miniature society that emerged on it was one of its most prominent icons (Douzinas 2013: 8; Gerbaudo 2012: 76: 108–9; Harvey 2012: 161–2). The Egyptian revolution, in turn, was but one instance of what was often referred to as an 'Arab Spring', which started in December 2010 and stretched well into 2011. Mass mobilisations against autocratic regimes emerged in Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, Bahrain, Libya, Kuwait, Morocco, Lebanon, Syria, and

several other countries in the Middle Eastern and North African region.

Later that spring, similar occupy movements would emerge in various European cities. The 15-M movement or *Indignados* campaigned against the ongoing austerity measures of the Spanish government. Protesters took possession of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona. In Athens, a protest camp was erected on Syntagma Square, right in front of the Greek parliament. Israel also had a short-lived, but strikingly diverse, ‘tent movement’ in the summer of 2011. On 17 September, an action group called Occupy Wall Street (OWS) set up camp in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned public space just around the corner from the New York Stock Exchange. In the following months, more than 950 local Occupy groups around the world – from Oakland, Boston, and Washington DC to London and Amsterdam, and from Frankfurt to Hong Kong – would follow their example. As Paul Mason (2012) euphorically stated, for at least a while it appeared to be ‘kicking off everywhere’.

A decade has passed since 2011 and much of the euphoria seems to have ebbed away. Most revolutions in the Middle Eastern and North African region did not lead to regime change – and if they did (as for instance in Egypt), the established change was short-lived. In some cases (such as Syria, Libya and Yemen), attempts to topple autocratic regimes led to destructive civil wars. In Europe and North America, the political outcomes of this ‘revolutionary year’ were less dramatic, but they evidently did not lead to any systemic or radical political change either.

Nevertheless, the movements of 2011 seem to have had a lasting impact on the repertoire and practices of contemporary social movements. In the decade that followed, similar occupation movements would continue to emerge in many different parts of the world: the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul of 2013; the French *Nuit Debout* movement of 2016; the Sudanese revolution of 2018; the occupation of another Tahrir Square in 2019–20, this time in Iraq’s capital, Baghdad; and the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) of Seattle that was established in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 – to name a few prominent examples.

The present study departs from the hypothesis that these various movements – some of which may be described as ‘protest movements’, whereas others had a more explicitly revolutionary aspiration – are the most recent and prominent exponents of a particular,

radical form and understanding of democratic politics. They are underpinned by a formal idea of radical change and how to reach it, but in practice they also (implicitly or explicitly) evince a more substantive concept of democracy. In order to reconstruct this understanding of democracy and contribute to its further articulation, this book will engage with the histories of various democratic movements and traditions of radical thought. But first, let me try to pinpoint what exactly it is that these occupy movements had in common.

The Prefigurative Politics of Occupy Movements

Surely, there are many significant political, demographic, economic, discursive and cultural differences between the various occupy movements listed above. They also intervened in rather diverse contexts, and often faced very different challenges. There is also no particular reason to regard these movements as the exponents of a single, 'global' movement or uprising, as is sometimes suggested (Hardt and Negri 2012; Mason 2012). Nevertheless, these movements did often refer to each other as important sources of inspiration (Graeber 2013: 237). They also do seem to have had several distinctive features in common – which, notwithstanding the obvious and innumerable differences between them, warrant their comparison in a number of respects.

The first, and most obvious, shared feature is that these movements all revolved around the (semi-)permanent occupation and recomposition of public space (Harvey 2012: 161–2). Arguably, this occupied public space was not merely a strategic means or instrument, but also at the same time an end or demand in itself (Brown 2015: 220; Butler 2015: 126). Second, these movements had a strikingly diverse composition: on Tahrir Square Muslim Brothers joined sides with the *shabab-al-Facebook* or 'Facebook Youth' (Gerbaudo 2012: 48; see also Mensahawy 2020: 130), whereas the Occupy movement in the United States attracted a similarly diverse crowd that included 'radicals (anarchists, socialists, anticapitalists), left-leaning Democrats, moderates, and even a sometimes vocal group of libertarian Ron Paul supporters' (Juris 2012: 265; see also Kotsev 2013). Third, none of these movements was initially spearheaded by established political parties or politicians (Tormey 2015). This often fed the assumption that they dismissed either representative democracy in its current state – or, even more fundamentally, political

representation *tout court* (Sitrin and Azzelini 2014). However, as I will argue later on in this book, this widespread idea may be based on a limited understanding of political representation and its relation to (radical) democratic politics. This is closely related, finally, to a fourth feature that was shared by many of these movements. The often-parroted claim that these movements had no clear demands is not entirely founded (Frank 2013; Mirowski 2013: 327): many of them did, in fact, make demands. But they often did lack a comprehensive agenda, and in most cases refused to engage with the state and its institutions. It appears that their primary aim was not to implement a pre-set agenda, but rather to try something new. As Judith Butler (2011a: 193) argued when she addressed the protesters of OWS in Zuccotti Park:

[I]t is true that there are no demands that you can submit to arbitration here because we are not just demanding economic justice and social equality. We are assembling in public, we are coming together as bodies in alliance, in the street and in the square. We're standing here together making democracy, enacting the phrase 'We the People!'

These characteristics – the occupation of public space, the lack of involvement from the political establishment, the diversity of these movements' composition, and the lack of a comprehensive agenda – all point to a more fundamental point of commonality. Within the confined space of an occupied square, they all sought to embody an idea of what a different society might look like. They often experimented with new forms or procedures of decision-making (Bray 2013; Cornell 2012; Graeber 2013), and alternative organisational structures (Gerbaudo 2012; Swann 2018). They developed new networks of communication (Castells 2015) and established redistributive and educational infrastructures (Flesher Fominaya 2020; Howard and Pratt-Broyden 2011; Khalil 2011: 245–50). In short, it could be argued that in their activist tent camps these protesters established a miniature society-in-development (Hardt and Negri 2017: 68). These protest camps did not merely serve as an instrument or as a strategic means of pressure, but also played a distinctive *experimental* and *experiential* role. The occupied square was shaped into a political laboratory (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 314). It also had an important symbolic, aesthetic and performative function, in that 'a numerical minority of individuals physically gathered in a public space' and claimed to speak for, or embody, the

shared grievances and interests of a much larger 'people' (Frank 2021: 70).

How, then, can this particular understanding of political action or change that was implied in many of these recent movements' practices be pinpointed? A significant answer to this question was given by the late David Graeber, a prominent radical anthropologist and one of OWS's co-founders. In an interview with Ezra Klein for the *Washington Post*, Graeber explained his movement's modus operandi and its categorical refusal to engage with the powers that be as follows: 'It's pre-figurative, so to speak. You're creating a vision of the sort of society you want to have in miniature' (quoted in Klein 2011). Within its own practices and forms of organisation OWS tried to present a model or 'vision' of the radically democratic and egalitarian society that it sought to bring about on a grander scale. Graeber employed a specific term to describe the rationale behind this form of activism: this movement was 'prefigurative'. As Graeber has explained elsewhere, this term tends to be closely associated with the history of anarchism. It refers to an understanding of societal change and activist practice that has arguably underpinned this tradition from its inception in the nineteenth century, and that has been described in various ways:

The original inspiration for Occupy Wall street was the tradition not just of direct democracy, but of direct action. From an anarchist perspective, direct democracy and direct action are – or ought to be – two aspects of the same thing: the idea that the form of our action should itself offer a model, or at the very least a glimpse of how free people might organize themselves, and therefore what a free society could be like. In the early twentieth century it was called 'building the new society in the shell of the old,' in the 1980s and 1990s it came to be known as 'prefigurative politics.' But when Greek anarchists declare 'we are a message from the future,' or American ones claim to be creating an 'insurgent civilization,' these are really just ways of saying the same thing. (Graeber 2013: 232–3)

Notwithstanding the many differences between the various occupy movements that have emerged throughout the past decade, what they arguably had in common was precisely this 'prefigurative' element – even though the term 'prefiguration' was not explicitly used (or even known, for that matter) in all of these contexts. In consequence, the term 'prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics' has received increasing attention in the course of the past decade – especially

in academic studies of said occupy movements (De Smet 2016; Douzinas 2013; Flesher Fominaya 2020; Gerbaudo 2017; Graeber 2013; Hammond 2013; Juris 2012; Pickerill and Krinsky 2012; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Smucker 2017; Van de Sande 2013). However, with its growing prominence, ‘prefiguration’ has also acquired a much broader application. It is no longer merely employed in the context of anarchism or other tendencies of the revolutionary left, but has come to describe the democratic practices of different – and, in many cases, politically more diverse – contemporary social movements. This renders visible a radical aspect that inheres in many forms of protest and contentious politics. It suggests that protesters and social movements have something valuable to teach us about democracy and radical political change.

The prefigurative practices of recent occupy movements challenged us to radically rethink democracy in a number of ways. These movements sought to change society by altering its political and institutional form. They experimented with new forms of participatory decision-making and political representation – such as the public assembly and council democracy. At the same time, they gave expression to a radically open-ended and non-instrumental understanding of democracy. Rather than a mere instrument or a means to a particular end, democracy also entails an immediate experience of freedom for those engaged in it. At the backdrop of these movements and their prefigurative forms and practices, the aim of this book thus is to develop a theory of ‘prefigurative democracy’. It both derives from and breaks with the original, anarchist conception of prefiguration in a number of ways, and reconceptualises prefigurative politics from a radical-democratic perspective. But before laying out the general structure of this book, let me first briefly discuss the genealogy of the term ‘prefiguration’ or ‘prefigurative politics’.

‘Prefiguration:’ The Uses of a Term

The history of the term ‘prefiguration’ is messy, complex and diverse. Several attempts have been made to trace its origin (Gordon 2018; Raekstad and Gradin 2020; Yates 2020), or to disentangle its various uses and meanings in practice (Cornell 2016: 284; Wilson 2014: 174–5; Yates 2015). One of the main challenges of this endeavour is that the term ‘prefiguration’, which is relatively new in this context, refers to an understanding of politics that long predates the term itself. Today, however, it tends to be employed in

various fields of study. It is also used in rather different – sometimes complementary, at other times contradictory – ways.

Although the term 'prefiguration' is often associated with anarchism, it originally stems from the tradition of biblical exegesis (Gordon 2018: 524–5). According to the eminent philologist Erich Auerbach (1984: 11), it is an adaptation of the classical notion of *figura*, which translates as 'plastic form'. Tertullian, one of the earlier Latin Christian theologians, first used it to describe how persons or events in the Old Testament prophetically foreshadowed the story of Christ in the New Testament. From the fourth until the eighteenth century, it was common among biblical exegesists to collect examples of such 'foreshadowings' in biblical sources. For instance, Passover was a prefiguration of Christ 'through the likeness of the saving blood and of the flock of Christ' (Tertullian, quoted in Auerbach 1984: 29), the sacrifice of Isaac prefigured that of Jesus (Auerbach 1946: 64), and Noah's Ark was considered a *praefiguratio ecclesiae* ('a prefiguration of the Church', St Augustine quoted in Auerbach 1984: 38). It must be stressed that such 'prefigurations' were not merely understood as symbolic similarities between historical events. Instead, there is a *real* interconnection between them: 'in the former the latter is as it were announced and promised, and the latter "fulfils" . . . the former' (Auerbach 1946: 64). In its original use, the term 'prefiguration' thus is underpinned by a typically pre-modern *kairotic* or non-chronological conception of time, which allows us to understand various historical moments, events or places as being 'simultaneous-along-time' (Anderson 2006: 24).

It is not quite clear how the term 'prefiguration' has re-emerged in radical political thought in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Luke Yates rightly stresses that it was 'already part of conversations about Left strategy' well before it was coined as a distinctive strategic concept (Yates 2020: 4). French anarchist and (heterodox) Marxist theorists loosely used it in the 1960s. André Gorz has been mentioned as one of the first sources to invoke it (Gordon 2018: 527; Gorz 1968), but an earlier reference can be found in the work of Daniel Guérin, who described Italian workers' councils of the 1910s and 1920s as 'a prefiguration of the socialist society' (1965: 129).² However, probably the first theorist to establish it as a distinctive conception was Carl Boggs, who in 1977 published a number of articles on what he called the 'prefigurative tradition' (1977a: 100; see also Gordon 2018; Hammond 2015). This tradition comprised various anarchist, syndicalist and council communist

workers' movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, as well as 'New Left' movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which all seem to have shared a similar critique of (orthodox) Marxism. Marx and many of his followers had generally failed to offer a comprehensive theory of what a socialist order might look like, 'with the result that the *means*, in effect, [had] become the institutionalized ends' (Boggs 1977b: 366). Arguably the best illustration of this is Lenin's Bolshevik regime – which, informed by a 'mechanistic' conception of socialist organisation (Luxemburg 1961a: 90), ended up reproducing significant aspects of the very bourgeois state bureaucracy that it sought to replace. In order to fill this hiatus and avoid the pitfalls of instrumentalism, anarchists, syndicalists and council communists instead aspired to be an 'embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of [their] movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience' that they eventually aimed to bring about (Boggs 1977a: 100). By 'creating local, collective small-scale organs of socialist democracy' (Boggs 1977b: 363) they prefigured a radically different society within their own practices. This is what anarchists and syndicalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century often described as 'building a new society in the shell of the old' (Graeber 2013: 233; Schmidt and Van der Walt 2009: 21).

A few years after Boggs coined the term 'prefiguration', it was taken up by scholars of the 'New Left'. The socialist feminist Sheila Rowbotham used it in her analysis of women's self-help groups and consciousness-raising within the broader Left movement. She claimed that these initiatives had often been 'the main organizational form through which the idea of prefigurative politics has begun to influence the contemporary left' (1979: 140). Through prefiguration, the feminist idea that 'the personal is political' had gradually sedimented into the discourses and practices of New Left movements. Social movement theorist Wini Breines (1980: 1989) famously used the term in her studies of New Left students' movements such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Young activists in 1960s and 1970s felt that, in the pursuit of political power, traditional workers' movements had done too little to establish social and political change in the 'here and now'. This new generation of leftists insisted that radical change requires a more radical and immediate remodelling – not only of the political regime, but also of one's own movement and everyday life. They experimented with alternative

forms of decision-making and organisation, but also sought to establish a radically different power dynamics within their own social environment, sexual or gender relations, and communicative discourses (Epstein 1991: 83; Kauffman 2017: 58). Employing the term 'prefiguration' in this context, Breines thus emphasised the aspect of 'personal and cultural transformation' that was central to the practices of New Left movements. 'The crux of prefigurative politics,' she argued, 'imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that "prefigured" and embodied the desired society' (Breines 1989: 6).

Breines's work on prefigurative politics has significantly contributed to its prominence in the field of social movement studies. In the past decades, the term has increasingly been invoked in the context of New Left and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Cornell 2011; Epstein 1991; Kauffman 2017; Maeckelbergh 2011b; Polletta 2002), alter-globalisation movements of the 1990s and early 2000s (Graeber 2002: 2009; Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009), and autonomous movements in Latin America (Dinerstein 2015; Sitrin 2012). It is from this body of literature that more recent studies of prefigurative politics in the context of movements such as OWS or 15-M seem to have derived the term.

However, as we have seen, the term 'prefiguration' has also come to be associated with one radical political tradition in particular: anarchism. Since the early 2000s, anarchist academics such as Benjamin Franks (2003: 2006), David Graeber (2002) and Uri Gordon (2008) have further established the idea of prefiguration as a distinctive or even essential feature of the anarchist tradition. Anarchists, it is claimed, have always insisted that the means of revolutionary change be consistent with its eventual ends – even though these ends may have been envisioned in quite different ways (Kinna 2016b: 199). As opposed to Marx and many of his followers, they dismissed the appropriation and employment of state power as a revolutionary instrument. As argued, although the term 'prefiguration' has only been in use since the second half of the twentieth century, it refers to a principle whose origins lie in the political thought of 'classical' anarchist theorists such as Mikhail Bakunin (Graham 2015; Van de Sande 2015), Peter Kropotkin (Kinna 2016a: 39–43), Gustav Landauer (Newman 2020: 438) and Emma Goldman (Gordon 2008: 37–8).

Towards a Radical-Democratic Theory of Prefiguration

In short, the genealogy of ‘prefiguration’ as a political term is messy and diverse. Its history is riddled with various meanings and uses, and there seem to be a number of differences and tensions between the various ways in which it has been invoked since the late 1970s. What most, if not all, definitions so far seem to have in common is that prefiguration is often described as an attempt to act in accordance with one’s ultimate ends. A prefigurative politics or practice typically pursues an exceptionally high measure of consistency between such means and ends.

However, such a means/ends equivalence can be pursued at a variety of levels: within the organisational structures and political practices of a political movement, or at the level of one’s everyday life and social environment. And this is precisely where significant tensions emerge between different accounts of prefiguration. Boggs, as well as a number of anarchist and syndicalist theorists, presents prefiguration as a distinctively revolutionary strategy that should eventually lead to systemic or structural societal change. In contrast, others, who focus on its more ‘everyday’ or personal aspects, instead define prefiguration as an a-strategic (Epstein 1991: 18) or even an anti-organisational principle (Breines 1989: 6). Seen from the latter perspective, prefiguration implies the prioritisation of immediate liberation within one’s own everyday life – and not the realisation of a radically different social or political order in the long term. But this a-strategic interpretation has, in turn, been contested by social movement theorists who either claim that strategic and prefigurative approaches are compatible (Polletta 2002), or emphasise the strategic merits of liberation itself. ‘If the goal is to create a world in which people are empowered to collectively set their own agendas and pursue their own aims,’ anthropologist Marianne Maeckelbergh (2011a: 13) argues, it follows that ‘the process of creating political structures that make that possible is a necessary step in achieving the goal.’ Strategic and ‘everyday’ conceptions of prefiguration may thus complement or even presuppose each other.

Another important question is whether prefiguration must be perceived as a purely formal term, or whether it is also underpinned by a more substantive idea of democracy or social justice (Gordon 2018: 527; Raekstad and Gradin 2020: 36). The advantage of a purely formal conception of prefiguration is that it can be employed or recognised in a variety of contexts. If it is merely understood as an

insistency to act consistently with one's ultimate ends, or an attempt to anticipate or foreshadow a distant future within one's own practices or organisational structure, then prefiguration can also be seen to play a role in neoliberal governance (Cooper 2017), in the politics of conservative Christians (Cooper 2019: 41), and even in white supremacist movements (Futrell and Simi 2004). In most accounts, however, the idea of prefiguration tends to be associated with a more limited range of political tendencies or traditions. It then is assumed that there must be an interconnection between the strategic form of prefigurative politics on the one hand, and its substantive aims or aspirations on the other. In its narrowest sense, prefiguration tends to be most closely associated with anarchism (Franks 2018: 40; Newman 2016: 64). As we will see in the next chapter, from its emergence as a distinctive political tradition anarchism has always favoured a strong consistency between its revolutionary means and the ultimate end of a classless and stateless society. But in a similar fashion the term 'prefiguration' is also invoked in the context of various, and often heterodox, Marxist or socialist movements (De Smet 2016; Holloway 2010a, 2010b; Raekstad 2018; Rowbotham 1979).

This book seeks to develop a theory of prefiguration from a radical-democratic perspective. To this end, it engages with the work of political theorists from the 'post-Marxist' tradition, such as Ernesto Laclau and Claude Lefort – and with Hannah Arendt, who has significantly influenced this tradition. These theorists are, or can be interpreted as being, radical democrats in the sense that they understand the political as an autonomous sphere. Seen from their perspective, the social does not precede the political but instead is politically instituted. There is no 'pure' or authentic society underlying the established political institutions (as for instance classical anarchists seem to suggest), nor is the political part of a 'super-structure' that lies on top of a material or economic base (as some Marxists claim). Instead, our understanding of 'society' is shaped precisely by its political and institutional form. This also implies that the political institution of society must always continue to be open to contestation and subject of debate. Social division and conflict have an important constitutive role. What is prefigured in the politics of contemporary social movements, then, is not so much a 'model' of a future society that is based on voluntary association and devoid of political conflict. Prefigurative democracy instead gives rise to new institutions and forms of organisation that render such conflicts and

antagonism more visible, and that make democratic politics more accessible to everyone.

There are a number of reasons why, compared with classical anarchist theory, such a radical-democratic perspective may help to better appreciate the democratic potential and relevance of prefigurative politics and protest movements today. First, as argued above, recent occupy movements often had a strikingly diverse composition. Although some of them (such as OWS and 15-M) had a strong contingent of activists with previous experience in anarchist or alter-globalisation movements (Bray 2013; Graeber 2011; Hammond 2013), they were often more politically diverse (Juris 2012; Kotsev 2013; Mensahawy 2020: 130). Contemporary radical-democratic theory accommodates a more diverse or pluralistic understanding of social movements than, for instance, anarchist theory, as it accounts for the productive role and democratic potential of disagreement or even agonism – both outside and within a social movement. Moreover, although a host of traditional revolutionary theories (such as anarchism and heterodox Marxism) have been employed in order to analyse these movements, it appears that many of their participants were not necessarily dismissive of representative democracy per se. They instead sought to ‘actively reclaim democracy and its institutions for the citizens’ (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 80) and often proposed a more participatory, decentralised or ‘bottom-up’ form of representative democracy than what is afforded by electoral-representative democracy in its current state (Gerbaudo 2017: 84).

Another reason to propose a radical-democratic reading of prefiguration, in light of recent developments, is that it makes apparent the close interconnection between its form and content. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1997: 11) argues, democracy cannot be reduced to a mere set of formal procedures or principles. It is a ‘regime of explicit and lucid self-institution’ (Castoriadis 1997: 4). Democracy nourishes substantive rights and liberties and must continuously create the conditions in which citizens are able to question its own meaning and revise its institutional form. This implies the establishment of a public sphere in which *paideia* (παιδεία) – the education of autonomous and critical citizens, and the exercise and development of their political skills – is encouraged and facilitated (Castoriadis 1997: 11). Form and content, procedure and substantive ideals or values, thus presuppose each other. This may explain why so many recent occupy movements not only demanded ‘real’ democracy instead of

neoliberal governance or dictatorship, but also sought to bring it into practice within their occupied public spaces (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 23).

The third advantage of a radical-democratic approach to prefigurative politics, compared with, for instance, its anarchist interpretations, is that the former may allow us to appreciate the democratic relevance and impact of recent occupy movements and their prefigurative repertoire. It is evident that most of these movements did not lead to any systemic or radical change in the long term. But does this, from a retrospective point of view, render them meaningless or unsuccessful? Traditional theories of prefiguration suggest that, even if a prefigurative practice turns out unsuccessful, there may be important lessons to be learnt from it. As we have seen, some anarchist or New Left sources also hold it to be a valuable and worthwhile way to improve one's own quality of life in the 'here and now'. But when it comes to the broader political impact of prefiguration, these theoretical perspectives often seem to fall short. How may prefigurative movements or practices be understood to contribute to political or institutional change in the present?

From Arendt to Laclau: A Theoretical Framework

In short, this book seeks to develop a radical-democratic theory of prefiguration – or, alternatively, a theory of what I will call 'prefigurative democracy'. Its broader theoretical framework will largely be derived from the work of two important radical-democratic philosophers: Hannah Arendt and Ernesto Laclau – and, to a lesser extent, from some of their main interlocutors such as Rosa Luxemburg, Judith Butler, Chantal Mouffe and Claude Lefort. There clearly are significant differences between these authors, and this range of sources may strike the reader as eclectic or even incompatible. Arendt's work, on the one hand, has been used and endorsed across the range of the political spectrum (Arendt 2018b: 470–1). However, I side with those commentators who read her as an advocate of participatory council democracy (Kalyvas 2008; Marchart 2005; Muldoon 2011; Popp-Madsen 2021). For the 'neo-Gramscian' populist Laclau, on the other hand, democratic politics instead revolves around the articulation of majoritarian, representative claims and the struggle for discursive hegemony. Why, then, engage with these two very different political thinkers? One consideration is of a theoretical nature, the other is more empirical.

A first reason to warrant the involvement of theoretical sources as diverse as Laclau and Arendt is that both their views are underpinned by a radically pluralist and constructivist or ‘post-foundational’ ontology (Marchart 2007). By this I mean that they understand society to be politically instituted: it has no natural, social, economic or otherwise ‘given’ foundation on which it rests. How society must organise and understand itself is, ultimately, always a political question. Both Arendt and Laclau thus promote an agonistic idea of democracy that nourishes and caters to difference and disagreement. What they have in common, Linda Zerilli argues, is the fundamental insight that there is ‘nothing that we all share by virtue of being human or of living in a particular community that guarantees a common view of the world’ (Zerilli 2004: 93). And this not only means that it is impossible to even imagine a world without politics – as there is no common understanding or interest that we naturally share by virtue of being human – but also that there always inheres a radical potential in political action. After all, it is arguably through politics that we are able to imagine our world differently.

At a more practical level, moreover, the Arendtian and the Laclauian perspectives on politics each address different aspects that are elementary to our understanding of prefigurative democracy and social movement politics today. Whereas the former draws attention to its participatory character, the latter caters to its more representative dimension. What is more, in practice social movements are hardly ever informed by a single and consistent theoretical framework or inspiration. They result from various political alliances and contingent combinations of different repertoires and discourses. Of course, and although their exact composition may differ from case to case, recent occupy movements were no exception to this. According to Jonathan Smucker, for instance, two very different tendencies were at play within the movements. Whereas one focused on prefigurative experiments with participatory democracy, the other was more strategically oriented and aimed towards the establishment of discursive hegemony and institutional power in the long run (Smucker 2017: 118–25). In a similar vein, Paolo Gerbaudo argues that the occupy movements were the product of a contingent ‘marriage’ between ‘the neo-anarchist method of horizontality and the populist demand for sovereignty’ (Gerbaudo 2017: 7). Prefigurative democracy may indeed be understood to emerge from a combination between a participatory or ‘horizontal’ view of democratic organisation and decision-making on the one hand, and an attempt

to represent or symbolically 'stand for' a larger social group (such as 'the 99%') on the other. As Arendt and Laclau are both prominent exponents of these two opposite sides of the radical-democratic spectrum, their respective oeuvres offer valuable resources from which to derive a theory of prefigurative democracy that combines them.

Structure of the Book

In order to establish a theory of prefigurative democracy, the following steps will be taken in the course of this book. In Chapter 1 I engage with the political thought of 'classical' anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin in order to reconstruct the history of what is now called 'prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics'. I argue how this conception of revolutionary change has been closely intertwined with the history of anarchism since its commencement as a radical tradition in the late nineteenth century. In anarchist theory, prefiguration is often understood as a principle that prescribes a high measure of consistency between the means and the ends of political practice. This was originally phrased as an attempt to 'build a new society in the shell of the old': within the organisational structures of a revolutionary movement, or in one's everyday life and social environment. I argue that the anarchist idea of prefiguration has a number of limitations. Most importantly, it is underpinned by the assumption that a prefigurative politics must eventually lead towards the ultimate end of a post-political society, which is devoid of political conflict. I claim that, as a consequence, the anarchist idea of prefiguration fails to grasp the radical potential of contemporary prefigurative movements and practices. Engaging with the political thought of Claude Lefort, I argue why prefiguration may instead be understood as an attempt to change the political institution of society (rather than to found it anew).

If prefigurative action does not necessarily imply an ultimate, predefined end, then how exactly do its means and ends relate to each other? In Chapter 2 I explain why Hannah Arendt's political thought may give rise to a different understanding of prefigurative democracy as a politics *without ends*. This is so, for a number of reasons. First, the concrete ends or objectives of prefigurative experiments may often be unknown to those involved in these practices. Prefiguration should instead be understood as a deliberately open-ended and experimental process. But, seen from Arendt's perspective, there is also an important experiential aspect to prefigurative

democracy that renders it particularly meaningful to those engaged in it: prefigurative experimentation entails an immediate experience of political freedom. It thus is questionable to what extent the practitioners of a prefigurative politics really wish to see their movement or practices come to an end (Cooper 2014: 223). They rather seek to prolong their prefigurative experiments as long as possible.

This gives rise to the question how prefigurative democracy can acquire a more durable, institutional form in the long term, whilst retaining its distinctive open-ended or experimental character. This question will be addressed in Chapter 3, in which I ask if it may be possible to imagine a distinctively prefigurative form of government? Many recent occupy movements were initially self-organised in public assemblies. But what distinguishes the public assembly as a typically prefigurative form of organisation, and could it also give rise to a more durable prefigurative institution? I briefly discuss a number of recent theorisations of the assembly-form, and conclude that it has a fleeting and temporary character: sooner or later, public assemblies tend to disperse. Is there an alternative form of government that may emerge from the public assembly and durably accommodate prefigurative democracy? Returning to the work of Hannah Arendt (and to Rosa Luxemburg as one of her main sources), I argue that a radical council system may best provide a more durable, institutional form for prefigurative democracy in the long term.

Prefiguration is often closely associated with participatory democracy. Recent occupy movements, such as OWS and 15-M, also seem to have had a strong critique of electoral-representative democracy in its current state. But this does not evidently mean, as is often argued, that these movements dismissed any form of political representation *per se*. They clearly stood for a much larger support base – even though they were never formally mandated to speak or act on the behalf of others. How can the representative role of these movements – as manifested by slogans such as ‘We are the 99%’ and ‘This is what democracy looks like’ – be appreciated from a prefigurative point of view? In Chapter 4 I engage with Ernesto Laclau’s constructivist theory of representation to argue that prefigurative democracy is by no means devoid of popular representative claim-making. In fact, it presupposes a very specific mode of representation that is not based on a formal mandate and instead is open to anyone. I argue that the rhetoric and practices of recent occupy movements, and the representative claims that they implied, had a typically synecdochal form. The synecdoche is a figure of speech

in which one of the constitutive parts of a larger whole takes upon itself the task to 'stand for' or embody this whole in its entirety. As it is underpinned by a different, non-mandated form or political representation, prefigurative democracy may thus be understood to offer a critique of electoral-representative democracy and its elitist and non-egalitarian implications.

Chapter 5 raises the question what happens on the 'day after', once the occupied squares have been evacuated and the protesters returned home. Recent occupy movements have often been criticised for their perceived inability to establish any significant political changes in the long term. But can social movements so easily be judged on the basis of their immediate outcomes? What renders prefigurative democracy 'successful' or 'a failure' – and are these terms at all suitable to make such an assessment? Or is there another way in which it may be understood to have a lasting impact? I return once more to both Arendt and Laclau, and reconstruct two geological metaphors for political change that they employ in their own work: Laclau's concept of 'sedimentation' and Arendt's notion of 'crystallisation'. These metaphors allow us to imagine how prefigurative practices of the past may continue to have political relevance or potential for the future, long after the protesters have returned home.

In the concluding chapter, finally, I establish how 'prefigurative democracy' enables us to better appreciate the democratic relevance and radical potential of protest movements today. This may leave the reader wondering what is the exact purpose of this book. Does it merely seek to provide a descriptive analysis of prefigurative politics, in light of its recent manifestations on public squares around the world? Or is its aim to present a normative argument on democracy and the relevance of protest and social movements? Do I seek to contribute to a better and more informed understanding of protest and its democratic relevance or legitimacy today? Or am I trying to propose a political strategy or alternative road map for radical change? And for whom is this book written: for political theorists and philosophers, for scholars of social movements, for political activists or perhaps for a much broader audience? The (admittedly rather unsatisfactory but most honest) answer to these questions is that I aspire to do all of this at once – and none of it in particular. The purpose of this book is to show why prefigurative democracy matters, and to better understand the place and relevance of protest, contestation and experimentation in a democratic society. This inevitably requires that I engage with my subject in an analytical as

well as a normative way. There is no way to ‘tell it like it is’ without at least implying how things should be (and the other way around). By engaging with this subject, employing the political thought of theorists like Arendt and Laclau as philosophical tools, I hope to both acquire and contribute to such a better understanding – among activists, scholars, students and everyone else who cares about democracy.